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... And the Soviets

Muammar Qaddafi wears makeup. He dresses up like a woman. He wears high-heeled shoes, goes into the desert to talk to himself, has drawn a line across part of the ocean, daring anyone to cross it. We crossed it. We'll show him who's crazy.

A miniature war followed. It is the sort of thing the United States is getting very good at. You bring an enormous amount of force to bear against a minuscule target. It worked in Grenada and, in a strictly military sense, it will probably work in Libya. Like the Britain of old, we now fight wars that are barely worth plaques on the damp walls of country churches.

A team of CIA shrinks says Qaddafi is crazy. And so, apparently, he is. But worse than that, he is mad—maybe criminally insane. His, though, is not a cunning evil. Instead, it is a crude one, evidenced in the blood-spattered walls of international airports and the botched attempts to invade neighboring countries. Ruler of a sandbox, he holds a press conference from a tractor seat and then, like Zeke of Arabia, throws his John Deere into gear and furrows his way into the desert. Both the tractor and its driver could use an oil change.

International law stands solidly behind the United States. The U.S. fleet was in undisputed international waters when it was attacked. In a court, there would be no question about who was right and who was wrong. But wisdom is a different matter from legality, especially when legality is beside the point anyway. The United States is pushing Libya around not because it has the right to do so, but because it has the power. As usual, might makes right.

But what is the purpose of the U.S. action? That it baited Muammar the Mad and he responded is beyond question. We left the keys in the car and waited for some kid to come along. But now what? The Gulf of Sidra is on the way to nowhere. There was no urgency in opening it, and besides, we have been there time and time again in the last several years. No one questions that it is international waters any more than anyone questions that, in a showdown, the United States has the guns to win.

Qaddafi drew a line in the water and

called it the "line of death." But his real line of death is behind him—some army officer who finally resolves to end Libya's agony. Some have tried in the past, and others will undoubtedly in the future, but there is little chance that they can act now. Any conspirator would seem to be an American accomplice. For the moment at least, the United States turned the difficult into the impossible.

And so we are stuck with Qaddafi. What will he do? Surely, CIA analysts have made their predictions, but their guess is as good as yours. No one knows. Maybe he has been chastised and will become a more prudent leader. Maybe. Or maybe he is enraged and will spill blood for the sake of spilling blood. Maybe. It could be that his humiliation will hasten his end, or it could be that it will embolden him. If Qaddafi is as mad as he is supposed to be, there is simply no predicting what he will do.

In a sense, though, Qaddafi is the least of it. It is the Soviets we should be thinking about. Somewhere in Moscow there have to be men who look at Mikhail Gorbachev and see him the way Reagan administration officials once saw Jimmy Carter. They will talk about lack of resolve, a weakness for the PR gambit and, manifestly, an erosion of Soviet power and prestige all over the world.

The same roll that conservatives call with chest-swelling pride—Grenada, Afghanistan, Nicaragua and now a willingness to contest Angola—can be cited in the Kremlin as evidence of Soviet weakness and lack of resolve. Somewhere along the line, the Russian backbone will stiffen and it will be morning again in Minsk. This is a dangerous game we play.

As this is written, the U.S. fleet sits astride the so-called line of death sort of saying, "Come on, make my day." From time to time, Libya tries and more Libyans die as a result. We have legality on our side, morality, too, and—more important—the power to back them both up. But if, in the end, an unchastened Qaddafi still rules in Tripoli, and Libya is brought closer to a resurgent Soviet Union, then the world will know something about the United States. It has power in abundance. What it lacks is wisdom.